

## Growing In Faith

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The First Sunday after the Epiphany  
The First Sunday in Ordinary Time  
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Proverbs 1:1-19; Acts 10:34-43; Luke 2:41-52

“After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.” -- Luke 2:46

In his letter to the Christians at the Greek city of Philippi, Paul told those struggling believers, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,” and being a rather independent-minded – some might say bull-headed – Midwesterner, I’ve always appreciated Paul’s advice.

Genuine faith, it has seemed to me for a very long time, has to be worked out person-by-person, case-by-case, experience-by-experience, day-by-day. Religion may be a group effort, but faith is intensely personal.

That’s one of the reasons some of the questions of well-meaning but intrusive evangelicals began bugging me even when I was a teenager.

“Are you a Christian?” “Are you saved?” “Have you accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior?” “Are you born again?” “Do you believe the Bible is the Word of God?” And so forth. I’m sure that at least some of those questions have been put to some of you on occasion.

I’ve always had to squelch the urge to reply, “That’s none of your business,” and I’ve been tempted to begin peppering my questioners in return with similarly highly personal questions, asking about their income or love life. So far, I’ve resisted that temptation.

If faith isn’t personal, it isn’t faith. We all know that. So did our Reformation forebears, who said, in Latin naturally, that salvation is always *pro me* – that is, for me. Not for me in contrast to you, but for me as part of God’s salvation of all creation. I am part of something great and vast and magnificent that has a goal, a purpose, and an end; and Christianity teaches and I believe that if I will allow myself to be guided by the Creator of all that greatness and magnificence, I, too, will be brought to my proper and ultimate end; in other words, I, too, will be saved. Salvation is *pro me*, for me. And for you.

Just as it was for Adam and Eve in that paradise on earth that was their intended home. That’s what the earliest translators of the book of Genesis called the Garden of Eden in 2:8 – *paradesos* – which is where our word “paradise” comes from. God made this earth a paradise for the earthlings, and we all know what happened next.

Salvation was there for Abraham and Sarah, when God made them the spiritual parents of a people ordained to be a blessing to the entire world.

And God’s salvation for the world was there in a baby in a manger, a precocious teenager among his religious elders, and a teacher and healer whose life of love was

stronger even than his suffering and death.

When we speak of salvation we're talking about all of that and a great deal more, so that when Paul urges us, like those Philippians, to work out our own salvation, I think he's asking us to hold the story of our lives against those stories given to us in Scripture and tradition, and figure out how each informs the other.

And if you're going to undertake the dual examination, chances are you'll start it during adolescence, about the same time in life Jesus was at in this morning's gospel reading from Luke. Jesus is doing what all adolescents do who grow up to be interesting people: he's listening to the teachers of his religious and cultural tradition, and he's asking them questions. If you want to grow in your faith – indeed, if you want to grow at all – that, it seems to me, is the dynamic that keeps us moving forward through life: listening and asking.

Remember the two-word bumper sticker from the 60s and 70s that said "Question authority"? That advice reflected a turbulent time in our culture, when we realized that leaders lie to their followers, that politicians follow the people with the money and influence, and that even decent people like us can collude in abominations like segregation and proxy wars.

So authority needs to be questioned. People in power do not always operate with the best interests of their constituents at heart. As Lord Acton reminded us, power corrupts, and it is the corrupting effect of power on those in authority that demands constant vigilance, resistance, and reform.

And we do that, as Jesus showed us in this morning's reading, by listening and questioning. It won't do just to listen; that's know-nothing obedience. Nor will it do just to question; that gives you nothing to work with, build from, or pass on to others.

True growth, for individuals and for groups, requires both listening and questioning. Don't we know this from our experience in relationships? How often have we said to someone we love, "You're not listening"? How often has a loved one said that to us?

One of the sad realities of modern life is that many of us have forgotten both how to listen and how to question. Many of us are so afraid of not having something to say that, when we say we're in conversation with someone, we're actually thinking about what we're going to say next instead of listening, with our full attention, to what's being said.

And as every parent and every teacher and every counselor and every pastor and every lawyer and every general knows, the art of framing questions is the art of getting things done.

"Can we isolate the problem here?" "Will you tell me what's bothering you?" "Were those the words she actually used?" "How do you think he felt about that?"

Those are the sorts of questions that move us past she-said-he-said, no-I-didn't-yes-you-did stalemates and non-conversations. We commonly think that people of action bark orders and others obey. But if you actually watch how an effective person operates, she or he always enters a situation by implicitly or explicitly listening. And in that listening, they're also asking, subtly and quietly, "What's really going on here?"

I'd like to think that the adolescent Jesus was engaged in just that sort of listening and asking of the authorities of his religious tradition, and that that listening and asking – not just once in the temple in Jerusalem, but also in the fields around his hometown of Nazareth and in the quiet moments in his father's carpenter shop – helped prepare him for the life of serving God and serving others he led as an adult.

Listening and asking, asking and listening – it's a cycle, but it's not vicious. It's the process by which we discover who we are, what the world is, and the role that God has given each of us to play in that world. In religious terms, it's called discernment, and

discernment is the process by which we grow more and more securely into a mature spirituality.

Through discernment – listening and asking, asking and listening – we come to recognize more and more of reality as a companionable presence, and the parts of reality that remain obscure become less worrisome.

Through discernment we move closer and closer to that ultimate destiny for which we were created.

Through discernment we are shaped more and more by that peace that the world neither gives nor takes away.

That's what it means to grow in faith. Yes, knowledge of the facts of Christianity is part of that growth – and none of us will ever learn all there is to know in the richness of our tradition – but more than knowledge is the seeking itself – the listening and asking, asking and listening – that keeps us pointed toward God.

Ask, the grown Jesus said, and it will be given you; search and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you. Faith is a process, friends, but more than that, it's an adventure, and a genuine, hard-won faith can give your life more meaning than you ever imagined possible. It's waiting and it's yours.